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MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER

A SKETCH

In the April, 1930, issue of the West Virginia Review there appeared an article entitled "A Weaver of Romances," by Ethel Clark Lewis. The subject for the sketch was the late Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller, who was a resident of Alderson, W. Va., for many years at the Miller home, "The Cedars." Through the courtesy of the Review, the article is reproduced here.

A WEAVER OF ROMANCES

By Ethel Clark Lewis

"To Be Continued In Our Next" was the promise which kept Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller at the writing of serial stories for nearly thirty years. An exacting promise, but keeping it brought fame and fortune to this indefatigable woman. A daughter of our Mother State, she came as a bride to West Virginia, where she lived nearly forty of the busiest years of her life.

"I wrote romances," Mrs. Miller says, "that followed a straight course from my brain to the tip of my fountain pen." There is a glamour in make-believe stories that appeals to young and old, yet true life stories of those who have triumphed over obstacles inspire readers as no fiction can do. An autobiography recently completed by Mrs. Miller, with the help of her daughter, is absorbingly interesting.

She tells of the happy childhood in

Old Virginia, before the war, of the little girl, Mittie Frances Clark Point, one of ten children born to her father, Charles J. Point, native Philadelphian of Quaker ancestry, and to her mother, Mary G. Crow, of Suffolk, Virginia, of naval and seafaring ancestry. In addition, there were three daughters and a son by her father's previous marriage.

While yet a child, the war came on, and she recalls both sad and amusing incidents of those days. The family lived on a turnpike leading out of Richmond to camping grounds of Confederate troops, and their cook was instructed never to refuse food to soldiers. Many a time their dinner was thus given away, but the children were thankful for scanty substitutes.

Her father, with Quaker principles against war, was drafted into the Richmond Home Guard, and often was compelled to be away from his family at night, helping guard the city. Later, her beloved mother, worn out by vicissitudes of the time, died a few years after the close of the war.

Because she was so eager to learn, older members of the family taught Mittie at first, then she attended a school kept by her aunt Margaret Crow, who lived in Portsmouth. During the war she was taught at home, but at its close entered Richmond Female Institute—now Richmond Woman's College—and graduated at the age of nineteen. She was considered unusually talented in literary work at school. While still in her teens, she was a frequent contributor

of verse and short stories to *The Old Dominion*, a Richmond magazine of merit, but which in those after-the-war years could not pay for contributions.

A few years after graduation, Miss Point married a young man of her own city—Thomas Jefferson Davis. At her husband's urging, she wrote her first novel, "Rosamond," which was bought by Street and Smith about a year later, for \$100. Then they went to Washington, where Mr. Davis was employed in the Government Printing Office. There a daughter, Pearl, was born to them. Mr. Davis then fell ill, and two years after their marriage, died. A month later the baby died, and the sorely bereaved mother returned to her father's home. Now, fifty-some years later, Mrs. Miller thinks the poem, "Beside a Grave," written soon after the loss of her loved ones, the best she has ever produced, and she has been writing poetry since childhood.

Desiring to make her own way, Mrs. Davis went back to Washington, where she found work writing syndicated letters, which gave a weekly resume of the actions of Congress. Five dollars a week was not a living wage, however, and she tried other work. Among her interesting experiences of this period, the middle seventies, she recalls a visit to Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth in her Georgetown home.

Most of this time she was writing, during hours that should have been spent in sleep, a novel, called by her "Clendenin's Love," later published as "The Senator's Bride." These combined efforts were too much for her then frail constitution, and she became ill, returning home at her father's command.

Back in Richmond, she was prevailed upon to contribute a column a week to *The Temperance Advocate* for \$10 a month. She wrote long and short stories, poems, editorials, filling several times the requested space without additional pay. The editor, Mr. Dill, then having to move to Norfolk, urged her to become editor of the *Advocate*, but she refused, having other plans. Unknowingly, she had reached a turning-point in her literary career.

It was in 1878 that Mittie Point

Davis married Alex. McVeigh Miller and went to "the mountains," as people in Richmond spoke of West Virginia. Their first home was a temporary one at Hawk's Nest. There followed an experiment at farming in Nicholas County, then they went to the home of Mr. Miller's father and his second wife, on a large farm near Alderson, in Greenbrier County. Here was a large family of young people, some being step brothers and sisters.

Here their first child—Irene—was born, and here they lived for nearly two years. Mr. Miller taught school and helped with the farm work. During this time, a little home was built on a 10-acre tract given Alex by his father. When finished, there was not enough money to finish paying the chief carpenter, a Mr. McVey, who had stopped to visit the Miller's on his way east. Nor was there money to buy furniture, so the young couple could not move.

"I was fairly and squarely up against the need for money," says Mrs. Miller, "So I put on my thinking cap with a sort of desperation, determined to pull myself out of this hole if it were humanly possible. I did pull myself out and the others, too. And I did it with 'The Bride of the Tomb!'"

"I had previously scorned writing for the sensational weekly story papers. I had aimed higher, but now I was ready to commit almost any literary heresy."

So she wrote to her half-sister, Sarah, in Richmond, asking that some copies of the story papers be sent her.

"I saturated myself in the style of these stories, and resolved that I would, if possible, out-do them all and write the most sensational story yet written. I wrote my story, which was a sort of composite of all the exciting and romantic stuff I had been reading, plus all my own imagination could add, and even included some suggestions of my husband's." Mrs. Miller says of this effort.

Not long did she have to wait for a reply from the editor to whom she sent the first chapters of her story. An immediate acceptance at twenty dollars an installment was received. How thrilled was the author and the

whole family, when the registered letter containing the first twenty dollar bill came! And how soon the money was gone! For it was given to the carpenter, who accepted it as full payment of his account and departed.

"My daughter has recently read aloud to me 'The Bride of the Tomb,' that flamingly sensational and improbable story, and when she had finished, I exclaimed, 'Rotten!' Yet I realized that I had put together a tensely melodramatic story, which carried the reader breathlessly along. I did what teachers of writing now emphasize. I decided what periodicals I wanted to write for, I read their contents, I made a certain style my own. And I succeeded!"

That serial is the most sensational of all Mrs. Miller's stories, she thinks, though none of them are lacking in dramatic interest. They were not "rotten" as so much popular fiction of today is, and one has much food for thought in comparing the beautiful heroines and their environment of the after-the-war period with the independent girls of our modern life.

Other serials followed, appearing in the Family Story Paper, which had published the Bride of the Tomb. The bulk of Mrs. Miller's serials were written under contract for three weekly papers, the New York Weekly, published by Street and Smith, the New York Family Story Paper, and the New York Fireside Companion. The second and third of these were published by brothers, Norman and George Munro, who carried on a friendly rivalry. After the publication of the "Bride," the other story papers took her up, and for a time she wrote back and forth for them. Then she entered on her first contract with George Munro, of the Fireside Companion, receiving at first \$1200 a story, later \$2,000 each. And the editor who paid her these prices first advertised for her address in the New York World. The ad was seen by a friend in Richmond, who at once wrote her. The rest followed.

She would have preferred writing poetry above all else, but soon discovered there was little money in it, tho' in after years her poems earned \$500 for her.

Several short stories and poems of hers appeared in the Greenbrier Independent in the late seventies, including the poem, "Lines Written at the Top of Hawk's Nest Cliff." A novelette, "The Tory's Treasure," was published in the Wheeling Register about 1893. At a much later date, she contributed three novels to the F. M. Lupton publications.

Mrs. Miller says that in looking back on these years, she seems to have been several persons in one. Soon after moving into their new home their son, McVeigh, was born, and in 1883 Lawrence completed the family circle, until Father Point and Sarah came to live with them. With her good salary, the little house was enlarged into a beautiful twelve-room country home, which was named "The Cedars." It was a most popular place with relatives and friends from far and near, and many, many guests were hospitably entertained.

Despite all changes, Mrs. Miller continued her weekly installments, each one reaching a tense situation and ending with the exasperating words, "To Be Continued In Our Next," except when one story was concluded and another begun. An installment meant thirty pages of long hand writing on foolscap paper. Typewriting was then in its infancy and she wrote everything by hand—her left hand, by the way—tho' she used fountain pens from the time they were placed on the market.

Engrossed with the earning of money and many home responsibilities, Mrs. Miller had domestic help, and her husband assumed the investing of her money, not always advantageously for his wife. Mr. Miller became a state senator in the nineties and served in that capacity for sixteen years. His family often accompanied him to Charleston for the legislative sessions, but despite the pleasures of the capital, Mrs. Miller wrote regularly while there.

All three children were graduated from the State University in 1902, each being awarded some special honor. The following year, while serving as committee clerk in the legislature, McVeigh contracted typhoid fever, and, after a month's desperate illness in a Charleston hospi-

tal, died. This was a terrible shock to the family and Mrs. Miller, after completing a partly published story, gave up writing for years.

Other sorrows followed—Father Point had previously died—Irene and Lawrence married and left the home. Unhappiness, long brewing, culminated in the separation of Mr. and Mrs. Miller. There were financial losses. Except for summers spent at The Cedars, Mrs. Miller lived for a number of years with her daughter, Mrs. Chainey, in Boston. In 1920 The Cedars was sold and mother and daughter have since made their home in Washington. The son, Lawrence, now lives in a western state.

As a young girl, Mittie Point had joined famous old St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond. About forty years ago she belonged to a newly-formed Writers' Club in Washington, which numbered among its members Edward Eggleston and Mrs. Frances Hodgson Burnett. Altho' in recent years she and Mrs. Chainey have been affiliated with the League of American Penwomen, the Arts Club, and the West Virginia Society, in Washington, Mrs. Miller has never been a club woman in spirit. Tho' possessing the poise of a true southern gentlewoman, to which her success gave an added dignity, she never got over her girlish shyness enough to speak in public. She thoroughly enjoys flowers and music and her passion for poetry has never abated. Mrs. Chainey is now compiling a volume of her mother's poems.

Despite the fact that a serious eye trouble prevents her from reading and writing, Mrs. Miller goes out regularly and enjoys the city, tho' she says of the winters in the eighties which she and her husband and children spent there, "The Washington of those days is a dear and cherished memory." She tells engaging real stories of interesting people whom she has met in the four capitals—Richmond, Charleston (W. Va.), Washington, Boston; in her travels in her own country, in the West Indies, and in Europe; and of those who have written to her, and have come to her home to meet the writer whose stories had given them pleasure.

In answer to my question as to

what book made her one of the best paid women writers of the period in the United States, she unhesitatingly replied, "The Bride of the Tomb." Her most popular novel is probably "The Senator's Bride," altho' "Lancaster's Choice," "Laurel Vane," and others have been named for that honor. "The Senator's Bride" has been translated into Swedish, and many of her stories have been "pirated" by English publishers.

The number of Mrs. Miller's published works includes eighty novels, over one hundred poems, and numerous short stories. Many of the novels are still being published in inexpensive editions.

With an undoubted gift for telling tales and the grit to make her own way, this writer, who earned nearly a hundred thousand dollars with her pen, speaks with authority when she says, "The most urgent of all incentives to a career is—poverty."

'TIS SAID—;

THAT Mary Ann Gash has shaved her head and Bro. Frye now thinks she looks like Joan of Arc. Bob announces that Miss McPhutt is definitely out of his heart and mind forever.

THAT Brother Maroske abruptly terminated his vacation at Red Hook because of the havoc his presence created in the hearts of the local milkmaids. Don Juan has nothing on our Don Paul.

THAT the windstorm which passed over Fishersville overturned Brother Cumming's TEMPLE OF NECESSITY located at the foot of the lane down wind from the manor house. Ralph jacked it up and has passed a wire cable over the roof, securely anchoring it to ground-peggs on either side. Never again.

THAT Brother Bragin has refused to accept an inheritance of \$50,000. He states that he'll be dinged if he wants to pay any Government inheritance tax.

THAT on concluding his address to the "Ladies' Society for the prevention of cruelty to milch cows", Brother Sissung made so deep a bow to the row of old pussies in the front seats that he lost his balance and fell off of the platform. Aside from

splitting his pants no damage resulted.

WE LIKE to drop in on Bro. Burns, who saves us much vitality and trouble in cussing out Hitler, the weather, the tax-collector, general hard-luck, and the gout in both of our great toes. While Bill still dreams of lying in the shade of palms and catching bananas, he has resigned himself to philosophizing and moralizing on his home stamping-grounds, contentedly munching on a bale of niggerhead that appeared to assay high in molasses content. From sitting down too much perhaps, Bill is getting a bit wide behind, and advised us to be careful lest we also develop saddle-sores, which, he said, he treats daily with chipmunk-tallow. Any tallow left over, Bill rubs into his scalp although he has not much more hair left on his conk than an old mule has on its tail. It was growing dark when we left. Bill, absentmindedly drenched an indignant and tardy hen with an accurate shot, reflectively scratched the red hairs on the back of his neck and reached for his jug of home-brew, offering us a snort of same, which must be as near an imitation of hell-fire as it is possible for a human being to concoct. Blowing a long preparatory and fruity hoot into his bandana, Bill floated away into fairyland on his apple-jack as we faded from the scene of bliss and back into the world of bilious humanity and fat politicians.

NOTICE: Such members of our Brotherhood belonging to the ancient and honorable order of SOAPDODGERS, will meet as usual next Friday night in the cow-barn, to elect a Chairman for the coming year.

Edward Morrill, 144 Kingston St., Boston, Mass. has just purchased a Lot of 89 Beadles Dime Novels (yellow backs) and originals too. Eighty of them are in consecutive numbers, all in nice condition, too. Speaking of first issues, originals, it will only be a question of time when first issues of Beadles will bring more than the second and third editions, the same as they do in books. Mr. Morrill is putting these in his next catalogue of fiction, and it should create quite a lot of inter-

est. He might even issue a catalogue entirely of Beadles, making the catalogue look like a Beadle, but before he does this he will need more of them, so let him know what you have for sale.

NEWSY NEWS

By Ye Editor

Wm. B. McCafferty, Box 1428, Seminole, Okla., wants a poem, before 1908 in one of the old Munsey Mags, a poem called, "Somebody's Sail Chase." It's about a soldier on picket duty, that got to thinking of his youngsters, who would be without a Santa Claus that Christmas. He slipped out of the lines, went home, stepped in, and placed all the presents he had, near the sleeping children, then out again to his post of duty, was captured and shot for deserting his post. Anyone know anything about this poem, if so, write to Bill, as he is now at the hospital, and will be for a while. See address above. Seem's Bill was in an automobile accident, and has severe injuries to the spine. He will be in the cast for 6 weeks. Anyone care to write him? If so, he will appreciate it very much.

The Nick Carter Question Again, by Weldon D. Woodson, appeared in Welcome News, Vol. 14, No. 5, Sept. 1941. Send 10c for a copy of same to Welcome News, 214 McCartney Bldg., 404 9th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

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